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"Living With Vermiculite" forever, thanks to EPA and Grace

Editor:

The now somewhat distant revelation in the popular press by Andrew Schneider regarding tremolite asbestos poisonings in Libby — a revelation that had been in science publications for a very long time prior to Andrew Schneider's articles — brought the subject to the victims in Libby themselves and the popular audiences of America for the first time.

With the publication of the EPA brochure "Living with Vermiculite," the recent pronouncements of Dr. Vikas Kapil and the formation of the EPA's "maintenance and operations group" in Libby that installs W. R. Grace in a position to help decide Libby's future, one would be hard pressed to find a greater model of failure in the general protection of human health than what exists in Libby today.

The "Living with Vermiculite Brochure" could not possibly give worse advice to the people of Libby regarding their future. All exposures to all human beings to asbestos everywhere on the planet have always been "episodic," meaning of various accumulative, short-term duration. All exposures of Libby victims to asbestos have always been at extremely low levels.

To give just one example of this: The city of San Francisco and the surrounding peninsula area is built on top of surface serpentine chrysotile asbestos. Some eight million people are exposed to this chrysotile every day of their lives at levels that in many cases exceed past historical levels of tremolite in Libby by hundreds of thousands of times. This has been measured. There is not one single death, mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis or lung disorder associated with this chrysotile among any of these eight million people.

"Living with Vermiculite" is a much different thing than "Living with Asbestos." Furthermore, there are literally hundreds of towns and cities in the world in the same situation as San Francisco. Still not one death ever recorded anywhere due

to environmental "asbestos/chrysotile" exposure. Yet there are a few dozen or so areas in our world where there are low level, episodic exposures to tremolite or erionite or crocidolite where the largest death tolls known from any natural occurring toxin exist. Libby is one of these places.

Dr. Vikas Kapil's pronouncement that "asbestos is ubiquitous" is correct. Chrysotile is indeed a part of the fabric of every human being's life. It is not unfathomable to understand that just about every human being on Earth is exposed to chrysotile on a regular basis. Our Greenland ice packs tell us that this has always been so throughout human history and long before. For someone to equate the commonality of chrysotile in our normal atmosphere with tremolite exposures is simply irresponsible and frankly exhibits a very low level of knowledge on the subject of asbestos. Just because somebody says it is so doesn't make it so. Tremolite fibers of the type that kill human beings are not "ubiquitous"; they are quite rare, and they are in Libby to stay, apparently.

I am certain that I shared many Americans' feelings when the Libby story was finally published in the popular press, after knowing for so long about it from science publications, that we would all be seeing W. R. Grace managers on TV carted off to jail in handcuffs. No American corporation ever killed so many of its workers, townspeople and complete strangers in other cities as W. R. Grace. But no, the Montana attorney general [Mike McGrath] made certain the corporation was protected, by indicating to the people of Libby a conflict with the status of civil suits in Montana. We out here all knew that was not correct when he said it. Libby did not seem to.

It is long past time for the Montana attorney general to step up to the plate and help the people of Libby obtain what is rightfully and lawfully theirs in the matter of health care. Because now, we have

W. R. Grace not only avoiding jail time, but sitting on a newly created board in Libby deciding the future of the town — and deciding how to spend the least amount of W. R. Grace's money as possible. Perhaps in our brave new world, we should ask Charles Manson if or when he is ever released from prison, if he would like to run for mayor or perhaps be a top W. R. Grace executive?

There are giant killing fields in America caused by mineral fibers. Jefferson County, New York; El Dorado and Amador counties in California, Fairfax County, Virginia, Mendham, N.J., where mesothelioma rates exceed the "old" environmental disaster standard set by Metsovo Greece, by a lot. The people of Libby are instrumental in changing these places. The most isolated of these killing fields, and easiest to see under the circumstances and easiest to understand, has always been Libby, Mont., and the associated satellite plant areas. The most important people to understand Libby and the satellite plants has always been the people of Libby themselves. Our government has understood it for nearly 40 years, they have simply refused to act. They still refuse to act. It would have only been the people of Libby themselves who could have made a difference. Can still make a difference by telling their government what is fair and correct under the circumstances. Yet the people have not. They have allowed every person in government from their state attorney general to the lowest physician idiot in ATSDR to simply run over them. The lives and futures of many people in America depended upon the people of Libby getting this right. Instead the people of Libby have accepted complete nonsense in the form of Jim Christensen's "Living with Vermiculite" brochure and Andrew Schneider's "Heroes of Libby Only Exceeded by His Clever Self" book.

As harsh as this might seem, the real disaster in Libby today is not the fact that hundreds have died and

many more will over the coming years — although that is indeed a great disaster. The real disaster in Libby is the huge success of social and scientific spin for political purposes imposed upon otherwise good people, helpless to seize their own futures and rights; helpless to punish the corporation that killed them and their families; helpless to prevent government from lying to them even more. It is hard to imagine a sadder commentary on the once outspoken, free and proud American citizen than what has occurred in Libby, Mont.

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